

Good Friday Meditation
"It is Finished!"
John 19:17-30
Rev. Rebecca Simpson
April 7, 2023

Good Friday is a lonely day. One day, set apart from all the celebrations we share in the church, set aside to let the solitary grief of this supreme death impact us. One day. A lonely day.

On the grounds of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, there is a small chapel dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus. The chapel has beautiful bright frescos covering the walls, that tell the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe's miraculous appearance to Juan Diego in 1531 in what is now Mexico. His experience of Mary's appearance includes the rich scent of roses filling his senses. So the chapel telling the story is strung with pink paper petals to evoke the smell of roses in the air. Imagine a small cross shaped chapel with close walls and high ceilings, pink petals floating above, bright pastoral scenes with the brilliant blue cloak of Mary standing out in each picture. It is a truly charming and fresh feeling place.

Visitors rub shoulders as they wander deeper into the cross, their necks bent, eyes up toward the story like a beautiful magical children's book painted from floor to ceiling. Walking deeper into the cross, and then around the corner to peer into one of the arms of the cross shaped building. There in stark contrast to the flowers and pastures, high on the wall, is a huge black crucifix depicting the ugly cruelty of Christ's death. Jesus' head lolling to the side, his gaunt, lifeless body, bare to the world, spikes piercing his wrists and ankles, a crown of thorns on his head.

That arm of the cross is dark, literally and figuratively. The murder of Jesus is an integral part of the beautiful story of Mary's appearance to Juan Diego, it is an undeniable, terrifying, shocking. And tucked away down that dark arm of the cross, it's easy to rush past it. To turn away, back toward the beauty of the evangelization of a whole nation of God's people with a heart-soaring miracle, roses, rolling green hills and a bright blue cloak.

Good Friday is a lonely day. It is like that one arm of the chapel. One point set apart from the joy and hope. One day to contemplate the depths of the most important death for each of us. The death of the Prince of Peace. The destruction of the Lamb of God. The pain, sorrow and wounding of the Lion of Judah. The humiliation of the Wonderful Counsellor. A lonely day.

I can only imagine on this Good Friday morning how lonely Jesus felt at times heading to the cross, and how desperately lonely Jesus' friends, disciples and family felt, powerlessly watching from a distance as he was crucified. I think especially of Mary, the woman who birthed and raised Jesus from a baby into a man, pouring out a mother's self-giving love only to see him humiliated and tortured. Old Simeon warned her that raising Jesus would bring her the pain of a sword piercing her heart, I wonder if she ever could have imagined it would be this bad. I can barely manage to picture Mary standing at the foot of the cross, staring into what must have felt like an abyss of fear, grief and loneliness. Her son and her Saviour dying on the cross. No deeper pain could be felt than hers.

At the height of that painful episode, Jesus looks down at his suffering mother and his beloved disciple. And even in his great agony, he has the grace to teach them, to comfort them, to let them glimpse his plan for humanity. This is your mother now, my friend. Mother, this is your son now. In this pronouncement Jesus makes a new family. He makes provision for the care of his mother and gives his beloved disciple a way he can be of useful service to his master in his absence. Even in his dying moments Jesus performs signs and wonders that prove God's love for humanity reigns supreme over the forces of darkness. Dying on the cross, Jesus makes a new family.

There are many ways to express the amazing work Jesus accomplished on our behalf on that terrible day of death. Cleansing of our sins through his perfect sacrifice. Victory over death, won and shared with us. Forgiveness that bridges the chasm between humanity and God. The boundaries of sin and death broken once and for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It really is no wonder we call this day Good. We, thankfully, have the mercy of knowing the end of the story, of looking back on the death of Friday with the elation of Sunday's resurrection. We don't stay in this lonely day, at least not for long, for we know the end of the story.

But Jesus's very first followers, they walked a lonely road, even if for only a few days, of confusion and grief. They experienced the loss of Jesus in a way that none of us ever could or ever will. Also true is that in the midst of all the suffering, ours and his, Jesus's boundary breaking plan for human thriving shines through. In Jesus's death and resurrection we become a family. By our acceptance of Jesus as the Lord of our lives, in our baptism, we become grafted into God's family, we become precious children of God. We become brothers, sisters, siblings, in, even with Christ.

Mother, this is your son now. Beloved disciple, this is your mother now. A new family. This was a pretty wild idea in the ancient world. In a time and place where family of origin narrowly defined one's "complete identity and entire future"¹ Jesus spent his time breaking these barriers down, redefining what it means to be family, what it means to belong, who was in ... no one had to be out anymore. Jesus' message of God's love and forgiveness available to all was radical inclusivity toward gentiles, women, children, enslaved people, people from foreign places, disabled persons and especially people known only for their public sin ... in the end there was no one who was not welcome to follow Jesus and receive the gift of abundant life today and forever. His revolutionary invitation was a counter-cultural approach to what constituted family. On Good Friday Jesus was "... not only dying for the sin of the world but creating a whole new world."²

In Matthew 12:47-50 Jesus is inside teaching and through the crowd someone says "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." This sounds mean, sharp, uncaring toward his birth family. It's not that he didn't care for them, it was a teachable moment – "... after this ... never again could the world say 'family' without Jesus' people thinking 'church'"³

Another time Jesus challenges his disciples to "hate" their mother and fathers in order to follow him ... to leave their traditional ideas about family and belonging, to challenge their social obligations and societal structures of allegiance and loyalty that they may truly come to follow Christ. Imagine the challenge of flattening your social landscape and no longer giving preference to only your own kin, or those who you admire or enjoy the company of or want to impress ... being given the command to love others simply because

¹ Willimon.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

God loves them, imagine learning to love people who you previously could not, would not eat with, talk to, spend time with ... and now you are to call them sister, sibling, simply because Christ has made a new family. Faced with the distasteful challenge to love our neighbours many of us continue to prefer the pain of loneliness and the sin of pridefulness.

Jesus broke the boundaries of sin and death, and this included breaking the social and biological boundaries of what constituted family, Jesus tore down the rigid and harsh classifications of people and where and how they belonged. He peeled them wide open so that we are all invited to call God Father and Jesus Brother. It really is no wonder we call this day Good!

On the cross Jesus assembles a new family. Will Willimon says Christ is "Like a magnet drawing toward itself all sorts of people, a family who have nothing to unite them except that Jesus Christ saves sinners." And again he says, "In baptism we are adopted into a new family and given the commandment to live as if foreigners were our relatives." This is at once a miracle and a daunting challenge, a reality already finished on our behalf, and a truth we struggle to live into.

We in this room today have a lot in common. We've each tasted pain, experienced suffering, partaken of sin, wondered where we belong, felt lonely. We might assume on a day like today, that it is our commonalities that draw us together, our common experiences, our common beliefs ... but "We who so long for togetherness, community, and true family are brought together, not by our great loneliness (or anything else we have in common), but by God's great love." This day is called Good, because God's love for us trumps our commonalities and even our differences. This day is called Good because God's self-sacrificing love is what we have in common. The love God has for each and every one of us, no matter how deep our sins, no matter how shallow our faith, is what draws us together and it is what makes us acceptable in God's sight. And this is what is Good about today.

Do not rush past the loneliness of today. The fact of death. The darkness of Christ crucifixion, ugly, soaked in murderous grasping sin, dripping with grief and humiliation. Do not shy away from gazing at the scene of the Righteous Judge, the Wisdom of God, with his life-force pouring out from his body.

Submit to the eerie hollowness of Holy Saturday, the stark silent lifelessness of the day.

But do not stay in this lonely place, because this day is called Good.